Koviloor Acadamy

THE "A.L."

No. 139.
(Second Edition.)

BRIGHT STORY READERS.

493

Grade III.

THROUGH THE WELL-DOOR.

THE SINGING FISH.

By ELSIE C. DILL.

Printed in England

360

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P.L. Lakshmanan

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THROUGH THE WELL-DOOR.

ADVENTURE I.

THE DRAGON KNIGHT.

JACK and I found the well in a corner of the castle courtyard. We had been exploring the ruins of the old place, and had sat down on the well-kerb to have a rest.

2. "I wonder if the well is dry," said Jack, peering into its dark depths.

"Most likely," I replied, leaning over too. Then, as our eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, we saw that a flight of green mossy steps led right down inside the well.

3. "Where do you think those steps lead to, Geof?" asked my twin brother.

"How should I know?" said I. "Suppose we find out."

4. So we climbed over the kerb; and very gingerly we descended the stairs, until we came to a kind of stone landing at the bottom. It was pitch dark; but luckily I had my electric torch with me, and by its light we could see the black water beneath us. But what was our surprise to find that a little stone-walled room opened off the landing!

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5. "This must be one of the hiding-holes that fugitives used to lie low in," said Jack, "when there was a price on their heads, you know, or something like that."

6. "They couldn't have been very comfortable," I remarked, as we surveyed the place. The walls were green with damp, and the water trickling down them made little pools on the floor.

7. "Look, there is a door in each wall!" exclaimed Jack. "Let's open them and see what is outside."

Now, this seemed a very strange way to build a room. There were the three doors, one in front, the others to right and left of us. Of course, the fourth side looked on to the well.

8. "We'll open the middle door first," I suggested. So we seized the handle and twisted and turned it until our hands were covered with rust. Then we kicked the door, and shook it, and at last gave a mighty shove with our shoulders. It then gave way with a crash; and we shot out through the opening, as if from a catapult, and came right on top of a dragon in the midst of a forest!

9. Well, we picked ourselves up, and looked at the dragon, and the dragon looked at us. It would be hard to say which was the most startled; at any rate, Jack recovered himself first.

10. "Hallo, old chap!" he cried. "You didn't expect to see us, did you?"

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"No," said the dragon. "I thought I had safely hidden myself from the eye of mankind in this dismal forest."

11. "Why should *you* want to hide from people?" I inquired. "I thought it was always the other way round."

"Because I am not really a dragon, but a man," was the astonishing reply.

12. Jack and I gasped. "I'm afraid we don't quite understand you," ventured Jack after a minute or two.

The dragon coiled his long, snaky body round a tree, folded his leathery wings, and signed to us to sit down,

13. "My real name," said he, "is Sir Godfrey of the Marsh. I have a castle on the seashore, and behind it stretch leagues of marsh-land, where, falcon on wrist, I used to disport myself in chasing the wild fowl. But alas! those days are fled for ever."

14. Here the dragon heaved a huge sigh, and seemed to lose himself in his sad thoughts.

"But you haven't told us how you were turned into a dragon," I reminded him.

15. "As I was hunting in the marshes one day, I found a most beauteous damsel," continued Sir Godfrey. "She had lost her way and was in sore distress. A powerful magician had imprisoned her, because she would not marry him; but she had contrived to escape, only to lose her-

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self in the bogland. So I mounted the Lady Clare, as she was called, on my horse; and we were gaily pacing along, when the magician came galloping after us on a big black charger."

16. "Just what I expected," muttered Jack, under his breath.

"Hold your tongue!" I retorted in the same voice.

Luckily the dragon had not heard us, and went on telling the tale.

17. "I seized the stirrup, and we raced for our lives to reach the stream which flowed through the marsh; for running water, we knew, would break the strongest spell. Once over the stream, we could defy the magician and all his works. But just as the horse rose to leap across, I lost my grip, being spent with running; and I fell at the magician's feet. What cared I? The Lady Clare was safe on the other side.

18. "The magician looked at me with his wicked eyes. 'Doubtless you think you are one of the flowers of chivalry,' he scoffed. 'I must reward you for this deed of gallantry in rescuing a fair maiden from the clutches of evil. You aim to be one of the purest of men, but I will make you one of the evillest of beasts.' Then he struck me with his whip, and I became as you see me now."

"Hard lines!" we sympathized.

19. "Lady Clare stood frozen with horror; but when I moved my scaly body, she cried to me

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across the water, 'Sir Godfrey, you have saved me from mine enemy. Strive to regain your natural shape, then come to me at my father's manor-house.' So she rode away; and I sought out this lonely place in which to hide my shame."

20. There was a long pause. Suddenly a bright idea struck Jack.

"If you were turned into a dragon by magic, wouldn't magic turn you into a man again?"

"Why, of course," exclaimed the dragon. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Perhaps there is something you could eat or drink," I suggested.

21. "The very thing!" cried Sir Godfrey. "I remember, one night last winter, a wandering minstrel came to the castle; as he sat in the ingle-nook, he sang us the adventures of Sir Urdyne, and how he came to an islet in the ocean in which was a magic fountain. Three fair nymphs guarded the fountain, and they told him that the water would break the spells of witchcraft."

22. "Then the best thing you can do is to find this isle," said Jack, "and see if the water will transform you."

"But how can I hope to find it, when I am like this?" asked the dragon-knight, flapping his wings.

23. "If we could get hold of a boat, we could cruise about until we came across it," I answered.

The dragon's eyes brightened, and he did his best to smile.

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24. "I told you my castle was by the seashore, didn't I?" he said. "I have a boat by the castle wharf, fitted out for sea. Would you like to come and search for the fountain with me?"

"Rather," we chorused.

25. "We will wait until it is night," said Sir Godfrey, "and then we can put to sea without any one being the wiser."

So we lay down in the wood, and the dragon beguiled the time with stories of the tournaments in which he had taken part.

26. When the moon shone down through the trees, the dragon uncoiled himself, and told us to sit on his back between his wings; then he rose up into the air over the forest. Away he flew, until we could smell the salt water and hear the waves beating against the rocks. Presently the castle came into view, and the next minute the dragon alighted on the wharf.

27. We all went aboard the boat, and soon the ebbing tide was carrying us out to sea, the dragon steering the boat with his foot, and looking extremely pleased with himself. When the dawn broke, he told me to take his place at the rudder, and Jack to look after the sail.

28. "In the daytime," explained Sir Godfrey, "I am going to stand in front of the boat, so that the people on any passing vessel will think I am only the figure head. If danger threatens, say nothing, but trust to me."

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29. So we sailed on into the Western Ocean, for the knight assured us that all the magic isles were to be found there. About noon we saw a great boat speeding towards us, driven by the oars of forty men. The big sail had an enormous raven flying across it, and the sides of the vessel were hung with shields of the oarsmen.

"Sea-rovers!" said Sir Godfrey.

30. A few lengths away, the rovers rested on their oars, and a huge man sprang up on deck, shaking his long hair over his shoulders. He coolly surveyed us from stem to stern, and then shouted,—

"A fair ship, my men, and a wonderfully carved figure-head! Methinks it might be real, so cunningly has it been painted. There are but two lads on board; so it will be an easy prize. Oarsmen, give way!"

31. But before the order could be obeyed, there came a terrific, blood-curdling shriek from the dragon, as, with smoke and fire pouring out of his jaws, he rushed upon the rovers.

Talk about a surprise attack! The pirates fell over the benches, caught crabs with the oars, and were thrown into utter confusion. But the dragon still went on roaring and smoking and spitting flames like an express train, while we madly danced and yelled.

32. Round and round the ship flew Sir Godfrey; and in a trice the sail was blazing, when his

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fiery breath touched it. Through the smoke we could see the longhaired leader urging his men to get out of the dragon's way; and as he persuaded them with the point of his sword, the ship began to draw away from us. Just then a breeze sprang up, and we were borne away, leaving the dragon still active among the sea-rovers.

33. As the distance between us increased, we began to wonder if Sir Godfrey had forgotten us; but presently he came flying back, with a smile that showed every tooth in his head.

34. "Well, boys," he remarked, "I think we have disposed of the sea-rovers. They seemed a little frightened, did they not?"

"They were scared to death," said Jack, as if he were very sure of it.

35. The dragon turned himself into a figure-head again, and our boat slipped along peacefully; in fact, Jack and I were dozing, when a queer hissing noise fell on our ears. We sat up, wide awake, and gazed all round. Even Sir Godfrey looked anxious. The sound grew louder, and in another moment we learned the meaning of it. We were being surrounded by great, spiky sea-serpents, dozens and dozens of them, all swimming towards the ship.

36. "Go down below," ordered Sir Godfrey, "and do not come up till I bid you." As we scrambled to do his bidding, the foremost sea-serpents rose on their tails, balancing themselves

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on the surface of the water, and prepared to do battle.

37. There was a little window in the cabin, and through this Jack and I caught glimpses of the fearful fight between the dragon and the sea-serpents. The spiky horrors had swarmed on board, and we could hear their bodies crashing about the deck as they shot their spines at the dragon. But luckily the scales on the dragon's body protected him, and the spines glanced harmlessly aside.

Then we saw Sir Godfrey, wings outspread, rush roaring round the deck, shooting fire with deadly aim at his foes. One by one the burnt and blistered serpents dropped back into the sea. And again we sailed on.

38. Jack and I slept like tops that night; and when we woke up next morning, we felt ready for anything. We were not long kept waiting, for suddenly, against the red sky of dawn, a black object appeared. Sir Godfrey stared at it steadfastly, as it quickly drew nearer the ship.

39. "Boys," he said gravely, "a great danger approaches, which I am powerless to ward off. What you see walking on the water is a spae-wife, a witch-wife, a worker of evil. Against her spells I can do nothing; but remember this, speak one word and you are in her power. She will enter the ship, and then we are doomed to death."

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40. To tell the truth, Jack and I were too amazed to answer, for our eyes were fixed on the figure that was rapidly coming towards us. Think of a woman whose long, wet, matted, yellow-green hair streamed behind her in the wind! Think of two blazing green eyes that shone out of a face white as the sea foam! Think of her walking alongside the boat, clad in a robe of trailing brown sea-weed, and stretching out her claw-like hands at us! And when you have thought, say honestly whether *you* would not have quaked. We did.

41. "Whither away, fair youths?" she asked in a soft voice that somehow reminded me of the tide lapping against the rocks.

We kept silent.

42. "Know you not that danger lurks ahead?" she went on. "In these unknown seas you need me to steer your boat into safety."

Still we were silent.

43. "Come," she said, "why no answer to my offer? Are you content to be crushed to death among the moving rocks, or to be swamped in the deadly whirlpool?" And then she laughed a horrible mocking laugh.

44. We glanced hastily at Sir Godfrey to see what he thought of this speech; but he remained immovable. Only there seemed to be a warning glance in his eye, which made us close our lips firmly.

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45. Then the witch-wife changed her manner. Seeing she could not coax us to speak, she tried to unloosen our tongues by terror. Her voice rose to a shriek, as she pointed at us threateningly with her skinny finger.

46. "Woe, woe, woe!" she shrilled. "The icy current will bear you away to the frozen seas where no man can live! The sea monsters will clamber over the side and devour you! Or you will float into the sea of weeds where the hot sun will bleach your bones! I see it, I see it, I see it!" Her eyes glared at us, and we shuddered.

47. "Let me in, fair youths," she whispered the next instant, "and I will save you."

I was just going to shout "No!" when Jack clapped his hand over my mouth. He was just in time, for the witch had already put one foot on the ship. But, seeing what Jack did, she flung up her arms, and, with a howl of baffled rage, sank beneath the waves.

48. For a long time we did not dare to speak, for fear she would come back; but at last the dragon broke the silence.

"You did well," he said briefly; and still we kept sailing on through the Western Ocean. The morning passed into afternoon, and the afternoon glided into evening. Just as we were admiring the gorgeous sunset, the dragon started up.

49. "Look!" he cried eagerly, pointing to the

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horizon. "There, under the setting sun! Don't you see a dark mass rising out of the water? It must be the isle for which we are seeking." He was so excited that his scales rattled with a sound like the pelting of hail on a roof.

50. We shaded our eyes and peered ahead. Certainly there *was* something; but in the fading light it was hard to see what it really was.

"We will heave to, until the morning," said Sir Godfrey. "We might pass it in the darkness, if we continued on our way."

51. So we hove to; and all night the boat lay rocking on the swell. It seemed as if the night would never end; but at last the dawn light came stealing over the sea, and then what a wonderful sight burst upon us!

52. In front of us a huge rock was whirling round and round in the ocean, and the waves were leaping up over it. As we drifted nearer, we could just manage to make out a hole in the rock on a level with the water, but in an instant it was out of sight.

The dragon drew a deep breath.

53. "This is the isle that Sir Urdyne found," he said. "I recognise it from the description in the minstrel's song. We must dash through the opening in the rock (it is really a tunnel), and reach the magic fountain on the other side."

54. Now, you know, it was all very well for the dragon to talk about dashing through the rock,

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as if it were as easy as crossing the street. But, having come so far, we were resolved to go on with this adventure to its end. So we sat tight, while Sir Godfrey steered the boat into the swirl of water that raced round the revolving rock.

55. Then we thought that surely our end was at hand; for we swept round the rock three times in a cloud of spray, before we managed to shoot through the tunnel. But, having done so, we found ourselves floating on a beautiful little lake with a tiny green isle in the middle of it.

56. The air was full of the scent of flowers and the sound of singing birds, while the rock walls which enclosed the lake were covered with creepers and rambler roses. As the boat drew near to the island, three beautiful girls stepped out from the shadow of the trees. Their long, sea-green dresses were caught up with golden girdles, and their flowing hair was bound with strings of pearls.

57. "The nymphs," whispered Sir Godfrey.

"Whence come ye, strangers?" they cried. "And what do ye here?"

"Fair ladies," I answered, bowing low, "we have come far over the Western Ocean in search of the magic fountain."

58. "But you and your companion have no need of it," replied one of the nymphs. "You are not under the spells of witchcraft."

"No," said Jack, "but this figure-head of ours

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is really a live dragon; and the dragon is a gallant knight whom witchcraft has changed into that form."

59. "In that case," said the nymph, "you may land on the island, and try the virtues of our fountain."

We speedily moored the boat to a tree, and then followed the nymphs through a little wood. Jack and I walked on either side of the dragon, who was greatly moved with mingled hopes and fears.

60. "Oh, boys," he said, "what if the water should be of no avail?"

"It's sure to be," we replied consolingly; for we had got quite fond of our strange companion.

61. A turn in the path brought us to our desired haven. In the centre of a mossy glade a fountain rose high into the air, splashing into a marble basin. The place was hemmed in with trees, and was full of a dim, green light that somehow made us think of church.

62. The three nymphs stood by the fountain and awaited our approach. We halted opposite to them and stood silent. Then one of the maidens took an emerald cup bound with gold; and, after filling it with the magic water, she offered it to Sir Godfrey.

63. "If thou hast been wrongfully changed into a dragon, drink, and resume thy natural shape," she said.

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Poor Sir Godfrey looked at me appealingly; so I took the cup and carefully poured the contents down his throat.

64. For a second, nothing happened; then there came a dazzling flash of red light that showed us the dragon writhing on the ground. And then the beast vanished. We saw a man in a green hunting-suit kneeling before the nymphs, and kissing their hands. But the next moment he arose, ran to where we were standing, and shook hands with us very heartily.

65. "Boys," he exclaimed, "this is mainly your doing. How can I thank you?"

"Don't mention it," I said. "We have had no end of a jolly time together."

66. Luckily for us, the nymphs were so pleased with Sir Godfrey that they asked us to stay and share their mid-day meal. We had a most enjoyable time; for when we had dined, the nymphs danced for us—and *such* dancing!

67. In and out of the trees they flitted like great green butterflies; then, coming into the open, they trod the measure of a stately minuet. Finally, with a sweep of their dresses, they sank upon the ground and smiled at us. Sir Godfrey rose to his feet, and we followed his example.

68. "For this fair entertainment, ladies, accept our thanks," he said. "And now, if you will graciously permit us, we will start on our homeward journey."

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69. So we all went down to the lake, unmoored the boat, and jumped in. The knight then took some considerable time to thank the nymphs; but at last we pushed off and made for the tunnel. We slipped through quite easily; and, a good breeze springing up, the third evening saw us anchored before the castle of Sir Godfrey of the Marsh.

70. "My castle and all in it are at your command," said Sir Godfrey, courteously, as he sprang ashore. We climbed on to the wharf after him, and the three of us went toward a little postern door in the castle wall. Sir Godfrey opened the door and motioned us to enter.

71. That was the last we saw of him; for as we passed under the archway, the door clanged to behind us, and we found ourselves back in the well-room.

ADVENTURE II.

THE CAT WITH TWO TAILS.

YOU remember how Jack and I found the well in the courtyard of the castle, and how we opened the middle door of the well-room, and met the dragon knight. Well, it was not long before we made up our minds to find out what lay on the other side of the doors on the right and on the left. So, one day, we went down the

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steps in the well-wall, and again entered the little stone room.

2. "Now, Geof," said Jack, "which is it to be, right door or left?"

"Let's toss for it," I suggested. "Heads right, tails left."

3. Heads it was, and we flashed our torch on the door in the right-hand wall. It was simply bolted top and bottom; we opened it with ease, and then stepped out into a field. It was just an ordinary-looking field, and for a minute we felt disappointed; but presently we saw that a faint track led across the grass from the doorway, and that gave hopes of some fresh adventure.

4. "Come on, Jack," I said; "we'll follow this path and see where it leads."

We strolled along until the path was barred by a gate; and, to our surprise, what should be sitting on the gate-post but a cat with two tails? It looked as if our hopes were going to be fulfilled.

5. This cat was a big black fellow with staring yellow eyes. One of his tails was black, and the other white, and they hung down on either side of the gate-post.

6. "Hallo!" said the cat. "Where did *you* come from?"

"Through the well-door and across the field," replied Jack.

"And what have you come for?" went on our questioner.

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"Just to see if there is anything doing," I said.

"There's plenty doing," responded the cat. "If you lived where I live, you wouldn't have time to wash your face, not to mention combing your whiskers."

7. Although whiskers were, of course, no concern of ours, we tried to look as if we sympathized with old Two-Tails; and we stood watching him, as he washed his face with his paws, and combed his black whiskers with his claws, until finally he got up and shook himself.

8. "You can come with me, if you like," he said. "But don't blame me, if things get too exciting."

So we passed through the gate on to a shady lane that led uphill, till it brought us out on a great moor. Then we followed a cart-track that seemed to go up and up until it reached the sky; but still that cat trotted on, waving his tails and purring to himself like a small motor-car. Suddenly he stopped and pointed to an old rusty horse-shoe lying in the road.

9. "Pick it up," he ordered.

"What ever for?" I asked.

"It may come in useful," said the cat. "Put it in your pocket, and anything else you find."

10. After a bit Jack found a cork; and, farther along, I happened to notice a crooked pin. We had not the faintest idea what good they could

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possibly be; but we picked them up, as we had been told by our guide.

11. Higher and higher we climbed, until the cart-track dwindled among the rocks of the hill-side, and then we found ourselves struggling up the slippery slope of a great mountain.

12. "Are we nearly there?" panted Jack, as he flopped down on a boulder and fanned himself with his cap.

"Almost," said the cat. "Do you see that belt of trees against the skyline? There is a building just beneath, and that is where we are going."

13. We looked in the direction of the cat's pointing paw, and saw a big grey stone tower, square in shape, standing on a ledge of rock, which jutted out from the mountain-side. It had a flat roof, and the walls were covered with ivy.

14. "Who lives there?" said Jack.

"Wait and see," said Two-Tails, closing one eye and looking very knowing.

"What are we to do, when we get there?" I asked.

"What do you usually do, when you go to a house, eh? Knock at the door, of course!"

15. "What a snappy cat!" I was going to remark; but just then Jack got up and told him to proceed, so we toiled along until we came out on the rock behind the tower.

16. "Now," said the cat, "before I leave you, let me warn you to remember one thing, as you

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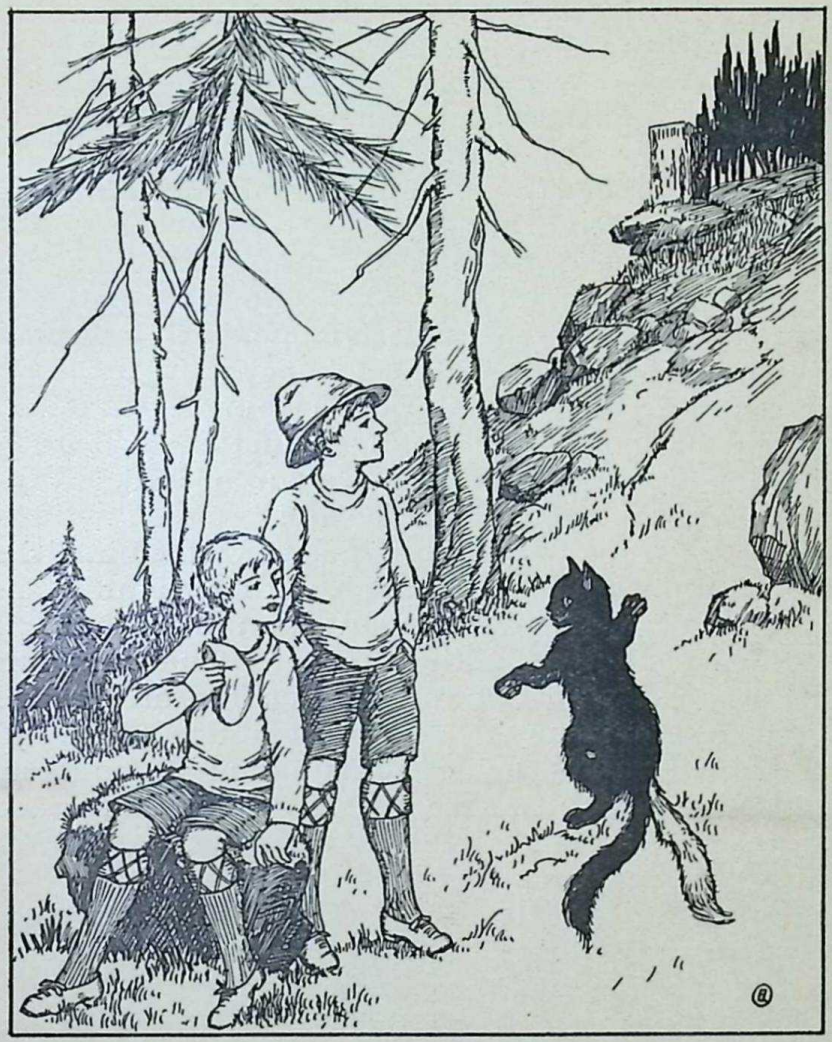

'"Who lives there?" said Jack.'—*Page* 20.

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value your lives. You are not to tell any one that I brought you here. Pretend you have lost your way on the mountains."

17. The next minute he was clambering up the ivy; and, on reaching an open window, he jumped through it. We felt lost without him, and quite undecided what to do.

"I suppose we had better go round to the front door and knock," I said. So we went.

18. The door was a massive one, with a pattern in nails worked on it, and a knocker in the form of a man's face. The nose was hinged, and Jack caught hold of it and thumped lustily. Instantly the door swung open of its own accord, and a mighty voice roared, "Come in!"

19. Plucking up our courage, we walked into the house and came face to face with a giant. The first thing we noticed about him was that his face was exactly like the knocker. The next was that the cat with two tails sat on the arm of his chair and took not the slightest notice of us.

20. The giant looked us up and down from top to toe with his sharp little eyes, and demanded to know what we wanted.

"A night's lodging," said Jack.

"And something to eat," I added, glancing at the well-filled table.

21. "Not so fast," growled the giant. "I'll have no lazy-bones about the place. If I give you bed and board, you must earn it."

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"We are quite willing to work," I said, and Jack nodded agreement.

"Sit down then," ordered our host, "and speak when you are spoken to." We didn't need telling twice.

22. After supper we drew our chairs in front of a huge log fire, and watched the red and yellow flames rushing up the chimney. The giant lit his pipe, stretched out his tremendous feet to the warmth, and informed us that we must tell him a story.

23. "We don't know any," I said, quite taken aback.

"Then tell me about the wonderful things in your country," he suggested.

I racked my brains, trying to think of some, till Jack whispered, "Tell him about the cinematograph."

24. So I told him all I knew about cinematographs; how, for instance, they were produced, and how the operator threw the pictures on the screen. When I was at a loss, Jack helped me out with a word or two; and I got on fairly well, winding up with the description of a most exciting drama I had seen, in which motors, trains, and runaway horses were the leading features. The giant listened attentively; but when I had done, he rose and yawned widely.

25. "I don't believe a word of it," he declared.

"Not one word!" echoed the cat.

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"But ——" I protested.

"That's enough!" said the giant. "Off to bed with you."

26. He pointed to the stone stairs which were in the corner of the room, and, candle in hand, showed us into a small bedroom under the roof. In a little under five minutes we were in bed and asleep.

27. I awoke next morning with the feeling of a weight on my chest; and, opening one sleepy eye, I saw that the cat was using me as a cushion. I pitched him on the floor, dragged the clothes off Jack, and proceeded to dress myself.

28. "What is the programme for to-day?" I asked Two-Tails.

"I haven't the slightest idea," he answered, stalking out of the room in a dignified manner.

And then we heard the giant shouting from the foot of the stairs, "Hurry up, or you won't get any breakfast."

29. We rushed down to find him consuming a dish of porridge; and when we had ourselves eaten as much as we comfortably could, we followed the giant on to the mountain behind the house. A number of sheep were scattered about, and the giant told us to drive them into the field at the foot of the mountain. He added that if we did not accomplish our task by sunset, it would be the worse for us. Then he left us and re-entered the house.

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30. "Any one can drive sheep," said Jack confidently, as he broke a branch from a tree; but he soon learned his mistake. First of all, we opened the gate of the field, and put a big stone against it to keep it from shutting. Then we made our way toward the sheep; but, the moment they saw us coming, they turned tail and fled up the mountain-side. Right up to the top of the mountain they climbed, jumping from rock to rock, until at last the whole flock was assembled on a shelf of rock overhanging a precipice.

31. We saw plainly that it was quite useless to try to dislodge them.

"Look here, Geof," said Jack; "I've had enough of this place, and I'm sure I'm not going to wait till sunset to let the giant carry out his threats. Let's go back to the well-door."

32. "If we can find our way," I assented gloomily. So we started downhill.

We had not reached the bottom, when we met Two-Tails.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," said Jack shortly.

"Why?" inquired the cat.

"Because we can't catch those sheep and drive them into the field," I explained.

33. "I see," said the cat. "When you went near them, I suppose, they gave you an exhibition of fancy jumping."

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We nodded.

"Now, if you will come with me, I will show you some *real* jumping," he went on.

"Thank you, but don't bother," I said, moving away.

"Do come," he urged. "I won't keep you long."

"Very well," said Jack impatiently.

34. The cat led us round to the other side of the mountain, out of sight of the tower, to a spot where a dozen goats were shut up in an enclosure built of rough stones. They came crowding round the gate as we approached, and raised an uncommon din.

"Let them out and see what happens," said the cat.

35. We unlatched the gate, and out rushed the goats like a whirlwind. Just for one instant they hesitated; then they shot up the mountain-side, like peas from a catapult. In the twinkling of an eye they were among the sheep on the rocks, rearing up on their hind legs, and falling sideways on them with their horns, while the rams with lowered heads vainly strove to hurl their enemies over the cliffs.

36. In a few minutes the sheep came streaming down the fells, the goats bleating with triumph from the heights above. Suddenly Two-Tails darted from us, leaped upon the back of the leader, and skilfully headed the retreat into the field below.

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37. "Come on," he cried, as he tore past us, and we lost no time in bringing up the rear.

When the last sheep had been safely shut in, we turned to look for the cat; but he had vanished. So we wandered about until supper-time, and then reported to the giant. He looked surprised when we told him we had done our task, and gruffly bade us sit down and eat.

38. That night we discoursed on submarines to the giant. Jack and I had been all over one, and we did our best to interest him in these wonderful inventions; but he merely remarked, as before, "I don't believe a word of it."

"Not one word!" echoed the cat.

This was not encouraging.

39. However, we got up in good spirits; and after breakfast the giant told us to go catch some trout for supper. We sallied forth with a couple of rods and a book of flies, and made our way to a brown moorland stream that tumbled down the hillside in tiny waterfalls, while here and there it lay in deep still pools.

40. All the morning we cast our flies; but the trout stood on their tails, poked their heads out of the water, and plainly mocked at us, as they watched our frantic efforts to capture them. In the afternoon a fine rain swept over the moor, and we tried those trout with worms; but still they refused to be tempted.

41. "There's witchcraft in this," groaned Jack.

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"Ha, ha!" a voice rang out above us. Looking up, we saw the cat swinging from a branch of a tree by his tails.

42. "Call yourselves fishermen!" he jeered. "Why don't you fish with the handle of your rod, eh?" He dodged Jack's stone, ran down the tree, and disappeared in a rabbit-hole with a yell of derision.

43. Jack started to pack up his tackle; but I dipped the handle of my rod in the water, just to see if anything *would* happen.

It did. The fish came leaping out of the water, and hung on to the rod with their jaws, as if they liked it very much. The big ones pushed the little ones off; and then they all looked at me with such a pleased look in their goggly eyes that I burst out laughing.

44. "Here, give me the rod, or you'll lose a lot of them," cried Jack, as he grabbed it and swung the trout on to the grass. They flopped about in all directions; and we had a lively time, before the last fish was snugly packed away.

45. The giant was not nearly so pleased as we had expected, when we showed him our fine catch. He cleaned the fish, fried them, and gave us our share in grim silence. Then he packed us off to bed; and when we started talking, he shouted to us to be quiet.

46. "What's wrong with the old fellow?" I whispered.

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"Sulks," said Jack. "He's mad because we caught the fish."

47. Breakfast on the morrow was not a cheerful meal. The giant scowled at us, kicked the cat, scalded himself with the boiling porridge, and then expressed himself in strong terms. We thought the best thing we could do was to make ourselves scarce, and so we started for the door.

48. "Come back, you lazy scamps!" he growled. "I haven't set you your day's task yet. I want some crows' eggs for supper to-night; and if you don't get them, I'll wring your necks!" As he said this, he glared at us so savagely that our hearts sank (as the saying is) into our boots.

49. We searched the hill-side for a couple of hours, before we found a tree with a crow's nest in it. The trunk of the tree rose straight up for a dozen feet, without a sign of a branch; and when Jack tried to climb it, he slid down, time after time. It was like trying to climb up a greasy pole for a leg of mutton.

50. "What are we to do now?" said Jack, rubbing his knees.

"Cut steps in the tree," I suggested. So we set to work, and hacked footholds in the trunk, until our hands were sore. We took most of the afternoon to finish the job, but at last Jack struggled up the tree and reached the nest. There were three fine eggs in it; but how was he going to get them safely to the ground?

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51. "I daren't slide down with eggs in my pocket," said Jack. "I'll get them in my cap and lower them down to you."

"The very thing," I agreed. But when Jack produced his string and tied it to his cap, it was not half long enough. We gazed at each other in dismay.

52. "You don't seem very cheerful," said the voice of Two-Tails. "What's gone wrong this time?"

I turned round to find the cat sitting on a stone, with his black and white tails wrapped round his toes.

53. "We haven't enough string to reach the ground," I explained.

"I'll soon remedy that," said the cat, jumping up and clawing his way to the top of the tree. He sat down on the branch beside Jack, put his paw behind him, and pulled off his white tail! Strange, no doubt; but, as you must remember, we were in a strange land.

54. "Tie this on to the string," he ordered, "and you will find that it will touch the ground."

Jack fastened the end of the string to the cat's white tail, and carefully lowered his cap. To our surprise the cat's tail stretched like elastic, and I soon had the crow's eggs safely in my hands.

55. Jack scrambled down the tree, and the cat followed him. Before we could say a word, he held up his paw for silence.

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"If the giant sees me with only one tail, he will guess that I have been helping you," said the cat, "and he will kill the three of us. Now I will tell you what you must do. Return to the giant, give him his eggs, and when he is asleep, slip out and join me. The giant won't suspect anything till breakfast time to-morrow; and by then we shall be miles away."

"All right," we answered, "we'll be there."

56. To say the giant was amazed to receive the eggs would be an understatement. He was, as a matter of fact, a great deal more than amazed. But was he *pleased?* Not a bit. He scowled worse than ever, and went about grumbling and growling like a bear with a sore head.

57. At length, however, we were able to slip away upstairs. Taking off our boots, we got into bed, and lay waiting to hear the giant come up to his own room; but, for some reason or other, he stayed downstairs. Presently the sound of his mighty snores came floating up to us. We crawled out of bed, tied our boots round our necks, and began to crawl down the stone steps to the room below. Half-way down, Jack stopped and pointed—the giant lay fast asleep against the door, cutting off our escape!

58. Back we went, wondering what to do. Jack crossed over to the window, looked out, then beckoned me to join him.

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"Let us climb down the wall by the ivy," he whispered. And we did.

59. The cat was waiting in the yard, his yellow eyes gleaming in the dark. We put on our boots, and followed him down the hillside and across the moors, until the dawn came stealing into the eastern sky. By this time we were quite shaky with fatigue; and Jack, stumbling into a clump of bracken, declared he could not go a step farther.

"Very well," said the cat; "rest for a couple of hours, and I will keep watch."

60. I tumbled down beside Jack, and was asleep almost as soon as my head touched the ground. It seemed but a few minutes before the cat woke us up, yawning and stretching with weariness. The sun was then mounting up into the sky; and, after eating the food which we had managed to smuggle away with us, we hastened on. It must have been an hour later when a piercing whistle made us turn round. We had descended into a valley at the foot of the fells; and now, on the crest of the hills behind us, stood the giant, shaking his fists and dancing with rage.

61. "I'll make you into crow's meat," he bellowed, as he came striding downhill towards us. But luckily the cat did not seem to be frightened.

"Throw the old horse-shoe into that heather bush," he said quietly.

62. I had quite forgotten that I had it in my

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pocket. It had lain there ever since I picked it up on the way to the giant's house. I fished it out and threw it into the heather, as directed. No sooner had I done so, than out of the bush sprang a beautiful brown horse, saddled and bridled.

63. "Get up!" said the cat; and when we had mounted, he leaped up in front of us, hanging on to the horse's mane with his claws. Hold tight," he ordered; and we were off like the wind, leaving the giant yelling himself hoarse behind us.

64. All day long the horse carried us, and at night we slept in a hollow of the rocks. The cat caught some trout in a stream close by, and we lit a fire and cooked them for breakfast. Then on we rode again, until the sound of galloping hoofs brought us to a standstill. Round a bend in the road came the giant, riding a great grey horse. A cry of triumph burst from his lips, when he saw us; and, spurring on his mount, he brandished a huge spiky club in our direction.

65. The cat whispered in our horse's ear, and the earth flew away beneath his feet as we raced along. On and on we went, until the moors bent sharply down, and a lake lay right across our path. The giant shouted with savage delight, for he thought he had us now; but the cat was too quick for him.

66. "Throw the cork into the water," he ordered,

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meaning the bit of cork which Jack had put into his pocket. Jack threw it, and instantly a lovely little boat came sailing from behind a pile of rocks which jutted out into the lake. We slipped off the horse and into the boat; then the cat seized the rudder and steered for the opposite shore. Down came the giant to the lakeside, using the most violent language, as he saw himself foiled again. Then he tore down a couple of big trees, and lashed them together to form a raft which he floated on the water. As we landed on the farther shore, we saw him slowly paddling his way across.

67. Jumping out of the boat, the cat led us up the steep bank that rose straight out of the lake. We glanced back as we reached the top, only to see our enemy in the act of leaving his raft beneath us. With the snarl of a wild animal, he began to climb up after us; and, in terror for our lives, we rushed down the other side of the bank.

68. "Throw the crooked pin over your shoulder!" gasped the cat. I dragged it from my coat, and threw it behind me. Up sprang a forest of crooked pins, six feet high! The giant came rushing over the top, and, unable to stop himself, with a blood-curdling shriek he fell on the sharp bent points; in a few moments he had breathed his last.

69. The sight was, indeed, an awful one; and

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when we turned to speak to the cat, something seemed to be the matter with him, too. I grabbed Jack, and he held on to me, for that black cat was growing before our very eyes in the strangest manner.

70. Fancy an ordinary-sized cat turning, all of a sudden, into a monster six feet high. That was what the black cat did; then he stood up straight on his hind legs, and shook himself until his skin fell off, and out stepped—a man! Kicking the bundle of black fur aside, he turned to us, and answered the question which our staring eyes asked plainly enough, though we spoke not a word.

71. "Yes," he said, "*I* was the cat with two tails. The giant's death has freed me. The story is too long to tell you now; but wait here, until I get my horse again, and on the way to my home you shall hear all about it." So saying, he climbed the bank and disappeared in the direction of the lake.

72. Now, we were so tired with the exciting events of the day that we fell asleep while we were waiting; and when we woke up, the moors had vanished, and we were back again in the well-room!

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ADVENTURE III.

THE INDIA-RUBBER MONSTER.

AFTER our adventures with the dragon knight and the cat with two tails, Jack and I felt that we really *must* try our luck with the left door in the well-room; and so we set to work to loosen its fastenings. The key shrieked a protest, as we turned it in the rusty lock; and the hinges groaned, as we slowly forced them open.

2. A flight of steps led downwards from the door. We could hear the sound of running water, as we descended them; but, as yet, we could see nothing of it. The steps twisted and turned in spirals many times, but at last we reached the bottom, where lay a boat.

3. The river that we had heard from above was lap-lapping against her sides, as she rocked in the current, the ground rose straight out of the water on every side, and a hasty glance showed us that we must either retrace our steps, or venture ourselves in the boat.

4. A beautiful little craft she was, painted white and with an awning of cloth-of-silver in the stern; her fittings were of silver, too. As we stood hesitating, two men rose up from the bottom of the boat, and made signs for us to come aboard. They were fine-looking fellows, brown in colour,

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with straight black hair—Jack whispered that it had been bobbed—and their white kilted tunics were secured with golden girdles.

They beckoned once again; then we sprang in, and took our seats under the awning, on a pile of purple silk cushions edged with silver fringe.

5. Our boatmen took up the oars, and we glided into mid-stream. The river banks were thickly grown with trees; the sun shone through the leaves, and we slid through water shot with green and purple and gold. Savours of unknown perfumes came floating by; gaudy birds flashed past, chasing gaudier insects, and even the fishes in the crystal water were pink and blue. Gradually the trees fell back, beautiful gardens bordered the river, and at some distance we could see the roofs of a great city.

6. A little farther on, the stream divided itself into three parts, one going to the right, the second to the left, while the third, which we followed, flowed through the centre of the city. We found out afterwards that these two branches surrounded the city, doing double duty as a means of defence and a constant water supply. Presently we passed under a bridge made of green glass, as I thought, and shining in the sunlight like a bright flame.

7. "My word, Geof!" said my twin brother, as we stared about us, "what kind of a place have we come to, *this* time? Just look at the

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marble steps leading down to the river; and even the mooring posts are made of gold! And the bridges are huge emeralds! What, I wonder, are the houses built of?"

8. But, before I could answer, the boat swung round a bend in the stream; and we were skilfully swept to the foot of a flight of stairs. A crowd of people stood looking down upon us from the terraces above. A silver chain rattled, as it was secured to the golden post on the landing-stage, and the boat was moored; then our boatmen, leaping out, helped us ashore.

9. "What is the next move in the game?" Jack whispered to me, while we watched the curious faces. Suddenly a trumpet rang out, the crowd swayed apart, and down the marble steps came a man and a woman. They were dressed in cloth of silver, and there was a deep purple band round the hem of the man's tunic and the woman's dress. Both wore purple feather cloaks, fastened with silver cord and tassels, and on their heads were circlets of ivory.

10. They came straight up to us with outstretched hands and smiling lips.

"Welcome to our country!" said the man, with a most polite bow.

"And to our home!" added the woman, as she took our hands in hers for a moment.

11. Jack and I looked at each other, rather puzzled what to do next. Of course, by this time,

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we had become used to uncommon happenings; but really this state reception was rather embarrassing. Fortunately the man spoke again, and in a very kind and friendly manner.

12. "Did my servants have the boat in readiness at the steps?" he inquired, nodding towards the boatmen.

"Yes, sir," said Jack. "It was you then who sent the boat, was it? We were wondering where it came from. Were you expecting us?"

13. The man seemed to hesitate. "I'll tell you later," he answered. "Suppose you let us know your names. I am the King of this country, and this is my wife, the Queen."

The Queen laughed at our embarrassed expressions, when we gave our names. She was quite young and, as one might say, jolly-looking; in fact, she looked almost girlish, with her hair in two plaits nearly reaching the ground. She took an arm of each of us, as we mounted the steps to the gardens around the royal palace; and the people fell back respectfully, as we approached.

14. "Come and see my flowers," invited the Queen, "and tell me all about yourselves." So for an hour we walked in the loveliest garden we had ever seen, among fountains and flowers and green mossy steps, through tunnels of roses, and then into a retired corner which the king called his menagerie. The "animals" were made of clipped

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yews, and they sat round a circle of velvety lawn, gazing solemnly in front of them.

15. Now, as we were returning to the palace, at the hour of sunset, a strange thing happened. For suddenly the air was filled with a roaring like the sound of an incoming tide; and immediately the King, Queen, and people all fell on their knees, threw up their arms to heaven, and moaned in mortal terror.

16. For our part, we scrambled up the nearest tree, to be out of the way in case some monster or other should come wandering along in search of a meal; but after a few seconds the noise died away, the people got to their feet again, and we slid down to the ground.

17. "What is it?" we anxiously asked the King; but he told us to wait until supper time, as it was a long story.

18. The palace was built of ivory and silver, with diamond windows. We were conducted to the banqueting-hall, which was filled with a rosy light that came streaming down from an enormous ruby lamp hung from the ceiling. Jack and I sat with the King and Queen at the head of the table; and this was the tale told us concerning the mysterious sounds which we had heard in the garden.

19. As I said before, the river encircled the city; but on the farther bank the land was cultivated for miles, and the market-gardeners and

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farmers brought their produce to the city for sale. Some little time before, the outlying fields had been visited at night by a dreadful *Thing*, and in the morning there was not even a blade of grass left; everything was destroyed. A couple of men who had been sleeping in the fields owing to the heat, were found quite dead; and no one could discover how they had died.

20. Since then the Thing had come nearer and nearer to the city, so that its roaring could be heard every evening at sunset. It killed every living creature it met, ruining the crops in its progress; and the people were in danger of being starved to death.

21. "What does this Thing look like?" asked Jack, when the King had finished speaking.

"Nobody has seen it and lived," said his Majesty gloomily.

"Why don't you send an expedition against it?" I suggested.

"We have," said the Queen sadly; "and they never came back."

22. In the silence that followed the Queen's words, Jack looked at me with a question in his eyes. I nodded back, and he jumped to his feet.

"Your majesty," he began eagerly, "my brother and I have come into this country, hoping to have some sport, and a monster-hunt would suit us capitally. We offer you our services, to rid the land of this terror."

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23. "How noble!" exclaimed the Queen. But she got no further, for the King shook his head at her, and she said no more.

After the King had spent some moments in silence, and, as it seemed, in anxious thought, he stood up and looked down the long table; then he turned to us.

24. "Boys," he said, "another expedition is setting out to-morrow. If you wish, you may join it." Then, in a louder voice, and speaking to the whole company, he gave this toast, "To the success of the brave men who are about to risk their lives in an attempt to save us from our deadly foe!"

25. Instantly every man sprang from his seat, with a shout of applause; success to the expedition was drunk with the utmost goodwill, and then supper was over.

26. The next day, the expedition, ourselves included, set out in great pomp for the monster-hunt. There were about twenty young nobles who looked very gay with their red feather cloaks, white tunics with red bands at the edges, and golden girdles. They were mounted on splendid white horses, with magnificent red leather saddles and little golden bells.

27. After these came twenty soldiers, one for each noble; and following the soldiers were a number of servants, leading mules that carried tents, food, water, and whatever else might be

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needed. The King and Queen saw us start, and, also on white horses, rode with us through the city to the bridge over the river.

28. "Don't we look rather like the advance guard of a circus?" Jack remarked in an undertone, edging his horse up to mine. "Nobody would think we were going to track a fearful monster. Why, it could hear the bells ringing a mile off!"

29. "Well, it is not our business to tell them so," I said; "but, all the same, I'm keeping a sharp look-out."

"So am I," answered Jack.

30. By this time we were well out in the open country beyond the city. For hours we rode through cultivated fields; but towards noon we dismounted and rested under some trees, until the heat of the day was past. The servants brought us a meal of bread, honey, and fruit on golden plates; and it was, indeed, difficult to realize that we were on a wild-beast chase.

31. As we continued our journey, we began to notice signs of the monster. Many of the fields were full of yellow, withered crops; and, here and there, the dividing walls were broken down, as if some creature had burst its way through. Gradually, every vestige of life disappeared, until we were riding through a dead land, with not even a bird's cry to break the stillness.

32. The sun was near its setting, when we halted for the night by some shrivelled bushes a

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few feet away from the roadside. Near by, a tree held up its naked branches to the sky, with not a solitary leaf to clothe them. The nobles threw themselves on the ground, while the servants erected the tents, one for each noble, and one for Jack and me together.

33. Presently we were all sitting round a roaring fire, eating our supper, and listening to the songs and stories that passed from mouth to mouth. It was a bright moonlight night, and the time passed pleasantly. At length, however, some of us began yawning openly, and then we made a move to the tents.

34. "Well, Geof," said my brother, when we were inside our own tent, "if this isn't the queerest way to hunt a monster, I don't know what is. First we start like a May-day procession; then we picnic under trees, and last of all we have a sing-song round the camp fire, right in the heart of the enemy's country. I wonder if they have been wary enough to post a sentinel."

35. He slipped out of the tent to reconnoitre; but in a few minutes he returned.

"Would you believe it, Geof?" he said. "They haven't left a single man on guard. All the soldiers are asleep with their toes turned to the fire, and the servants are snoring by the horses. Anything on the prowl would have a clear walk over."

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36. I stopped unlacing my boots, and got off the camp-bed on which I had been seated.

"In that case I'm not staying in this tent, to be murdered in my sleep, as likely as not," I declared. "Suppose we climb that tree and keep watch!"

37. So we picked up an armful of rugs and a couple of pillows, and with great stealth we climbed the dead tree and made ourselves comfortable among the branches.

38. For a long time nothing happened. Suddenly Jack touched me and pointed to a distant bend in the road. I rubbed my drowsy eyes and looked. A dreadful Something was making for our camp at top speed, a Something that seemed wrapped about in a faint blue mist.

39. "It's the monster," I gasped, clutching Jack and drawing the rug over our heads. "Let's hope he doesn't discover us."

There was no time to warn the sleeping men, for next instant the monster was upon them.

40. The bright moonlight made its form quite plain; and a strange and fearful thing it was. It had a huge body like an elephant's, four short crooked legs, a long serpent's neck with a flat head armed with cruel teeth, and a trailing tail like a crocodile's. It was of a flesh-pink colour above, and a sandy-brown below; and the blue mist we had seen was its breath, which it puffed out as it rushed along, making a sort of fog.

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41. The monster paused under our tree to take stock of the place, but luckily it did not see us. The dying fire shot up in a last flicker, and the beast waddled across to it. He poked his nose into the hot embers, and then the flames soared green and blue and yellow. Next he turned to the soldiers, and deliberately breathed in the face of every one. The blue mist was thick on the ground, and seemed to be rising and suffocating us.

42. "Geof," said Jack, with horror-stricken face, "the monster is poisoning them with its breath. Keep your mouth covered, or we shall be killed too!"

43. Having finished its awful work by the fire, the monster stuck its head into each tent and blew out a cloud of poison. Then it lurched across to where the servants lay, and poisoned them as well. Lastly it looked all round, gave a grunt of satisfaction, and made off in the direction from which it had come.

44. Jack and I sat there, not daring to move for fear the Thing would return. Slowly the poisonous mist dispersed before the dawn-wind, and we fell asleep in the arms of the tree.

45. The sun was overhead when we awoke, both stiff and hungry. For a moment, so sharp was our hunger, we did not recall the dreadful happenings of the night; but the sight of the still bodies below very soon reminded us.

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46. "There is only one thing for us to do now," I said; "that is to follow the monster to its den, and then return to the city and obtain help."

"Perhaps we could finish the job ourselves," said Jack hopefully. "Anyway, there's no harm in trying."

47. In the broad daylight we could see the creature's immense footprints in the sandy road; and, after filling our pockets with food, we started to trace the monster. We followed our trail until we found ourselves in the midst of a barren and sandy plain, across which the footmarks led to the base of a great mountain that rose on the eastern horizon.

48. We proceeded in that direction; and, late in the afternoon, we found our way barred by a wall of rock that jutted out from the mountain-side. Here the monster's footprints came to an end. Where had it gone?

49. "It couldn't have climbed the rock," said Jack, "because it's as steep as the side of a house. And you can see that the sand is quite smooth; so the Thing has not burrowed beneath it."

"Well, then," I said, "if the monster hasn't gone over the rock or under the rock, it must have gone *through* the rock."

50. "Why," laughed Jack, "it would need a tremendous tunnel to let that brute through."

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"But there is a hole in the rock," I pointed out. "There, just above the footprints!"

51. There certainly was a round hole, about a foot in diameter. We pushed our arms in up to the shoulder, but could feel no end. Of course, it was simply impossible to think the monster had crawled through that tiny opening; but still the question remained, where had it vanished to?

52. We were so interested in trying to solve the mystery of the monster's disappearance that we did not notice that a wind had sprung up, ruffling the surface of the sand. In fact, it was now blowing the sand about in clouds; and it had completely wiped out the monster's tracks and our own, by which we had intended to return to the camp and then on to the city. What was to become of us? We were lost!

53. "Come on, Jack," I said, after a pause of dismay. "Let's get as far away from this rock as we can before sunset, or the Thing may suddenly appear and kill us."

54. Off we set, with many a backward glance to see if we were pursued; but after a time our pace slackened, as the sand made such heavy going. The sun set, and almost immediately the darkness fell. But we stumbled on, with our boots full of sand; and, to make matters worse, we were parched with thirst. At last we were so weary that we felt we didn't care a button whether a hundred monsters came in pursuit of

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us; but just then we saw a flickering red light a little to the right of us.

55. "Anything is better than this awful sand," said Jack, as we turned to see what was meant by the strange glow. In a few minutes we were walking on grass, and another quarter of an hour brought us an explanation.

56. Before us lay a field of red poppies, stretching away as far as we could see. Each poppy gave out a red light; as the evening breeze wandered among them, they bent their heads, and waves of light went sweeping across the night sky.

57. We walked along the side of the field, and presently we came to a gate opening on to a path that ran through the centre of it. We dragged ourselves along this path, until, in the very midst of the poppies, we came upon a little house. It was covered with feathers, mostly green and red; and in the doorway stood a dwarf.

58. He wore a red suit, green shoes and stockings, and a tight-fitting black cap. He was not nearly so tall as we were; but, however odd he might look, his eyes were friendly as he spoke to us.

59. "Have you come out of the desert?" he asked, looking at our sandy boots.

We nodded; it was hard to speak, for our mouths were so dry. The dwarf's keen eyes ran over us.

60. "Come inside," he said; and as we crossed

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the threshold of the Feather House, the hunting cry of the monster came faintly to our ears.

The dwarf took two long glasses from a shelf, filled them with a queer-looking liquid, and brought them to us.

61. "Drink it all, then go to sleep," he said to us. "You can tell me your tale to-morrow."

We swallowed the stuff, kicked off our boots, and then, lying down on a heap of straw on the floor, fell fast asleep.

62. Next day, the dwarf listened to the story of our adventures with great interest, and then proceeded to solve the mystery of the big beast's disappearance into the little hole.

63. "The monster, I must tell you, is not made of flesh and blood, but *india-rubber,*" he said. "It lives in a cave in the rocks you saw, and wriggles through the narrow passage like a snake."

64. "Is there any way of killing it?" asked Jack.

"The india-rubber monster goes hunting only between sunset and sunrise. If it is not back in its cave by sunrise, it will die," said the dwarf.

65. "Then let's keep it out," I cried.

"Suppose I gave you a bag of my poppy-heads," suggested the dwarf. "Would you be willing to go back to the rocks and scatter them outside the opening? There is just a chance that the monster may eat the poppy-heads; and if it does, I know that it will be sent to sleep for hours."

66. So the upshot was that, shortly before sun-

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set, we again found ourselves near the cave of the india-rubber monster. Each of us carried a bag of poppy-heads, and we proceeded to lay a trail leading away from the hole towards the mountain. We climbed up one of the steep paths, dropping poppy-heads as we went, and came out on to a ledge of rock to watch what happened.

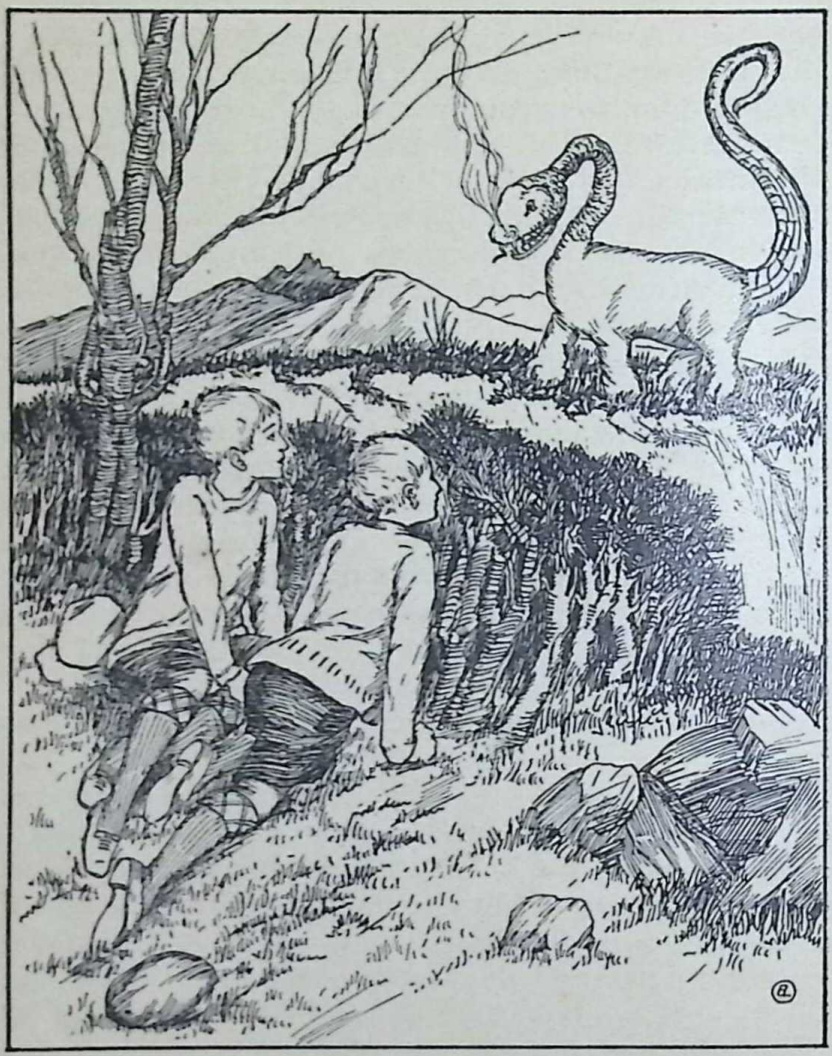
67. After a bit we heard a great snorting and blowing; and, next instant, what looked like a pinky-yellow hose-pipe came trickling out of the hole. There were yards of it; but, as the end appeared, the seeming hose-pipe grew shorter and swelled and twisted, until at last the monster stood revealed in all its hideousness.

68. It snuffed about the ground, as if undecided what to do; then, luckily for us, it caught sight of the poppy-heads. It turned one over with its foot, smelt it, seemed to think it good, and then ate it.

"Thank goodness," said Jack, "it is eating the lot!"

69. Now, just as we were congratulating ourselves on this fact, the monster looked up and saw us. With a bellow of rage it rushed in our direction; and we fled for our lives up the mountain-side.

70. The Thing came pounding behind us; but we leapt a cleft that suddenly yawned at our feet, and hid behind some bushes on the other side. On it came and halted at the edge of a



'We hid behind some bushes on the other side.'—*Page* 51.

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precipice, swaying uncertainly on its short legs. Then, to our joy, it flopped down on the ground, and lay in a deep sleep.

71. All night long Jack and I crouched among the bushes, afraid to stir for fear that we should awaken our enemy. But fortune favoured us; at length the dawn broke, the sun rose, and at that moment, with one fearful shriek, the india-rubber monster opened its eyes, gazed round wildly, and died!

72. At the foot of the mountain we found our good friend, the poppy dwarf, waiting for us with his camel; and, mounting it, we rode back to the city. Just before we reached the bridge, a golden carriage came driving swiftly along to meet us; and out of it jumped the King.

73. "What news?" he cried anxiously.

"The monster is dead, sire," we replied.

"Then the soothsayers spoke truth, when they prophesied that two strange youths would kill the monster," said the King. "That is why I sent the boat for you. But get into the carriage, and we will return and tell the Queen."

74. So Jack and I got in. Then suddenly there was a blinding light; and when we could see again, we were back in the well-room!

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THE SINGING FISH.

JACK and I were walking along a woodland path, one day, when we heard some one singing.

"Who can it be?" asked Jack; for we little expected to see anybody, being in a very lonely part of the wood, far away from the nearest woodcutter's hut.

"Let us find out," I said. As you will have guessed by now, my twin-brother and I are always ready for an adventure.

2. So we made for the sound of the voice; and in a short time the path which we followed, opened out into a glade. In the middle of the glade was a pond, covered with water-lilies; and resting on the big lily-leaves was a great fish, lying half in, and half out of, the water.

3. Now, though fish, in general, are dumb creatures, this one certainly was not, for he lay basking in the sun, and singing merrily. He stopped, as he saw us watching him; and then he called to us to come nearer. So we went to the edge of the pond, and waited to hear what he would say.

4. "I dare say that you will be surprised to hear a fish singing," he began. "Once a year I

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leave my home under the water, and rise to the surface to view the world. It all looks so beautiful that I sing for joy. In fact, I feel so happy to-day that I will grant any request you like to make." Here the fish flicked some water over his head with his tail, and looked at us as if waiting to hear what we would ask.

5. "What a *queer fish!*" whispered Jack. "I wonder if he really *can* do anything."

"Let us ask him to put us in the way of a fresh adventure," I replied. "It would be fine fun."

6. Jack nodded, as if he thought so too.

"We should like to have an adventure with a distressed princess," I remarked, turning to the fish.

7. "The very one you want is waiting for you round the corner," said the fish. "Keep straight on and turn to the right." Having spoken, he popped under the water and vanished from our sight.

8. "We may as well see if it's the truth," said Jack. So we set off along the path again, until it bent sharply to the right; and there we saw a blacksmith's forge, with the smith himself shoeing a horse in the doorway.

9. Sitting on a seat outside the forge, was, really and truly, a princess. We knew she was one, because she had a gold circlet on her head and wore a dress of fine spun silver.

"Haste, good smith," she was saying, as we

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approached; "or I shall be overtaken by my enemies."

10. She sprang to her feet at the noise of footsteps; but, seeing only two boys, she sat down again.

"Where do you come from?" she asked, eyeing us up and down; and, to judge from her tone, she scarcely liked the look of us.

11. "Madam," said Jack, raising his cap, "the singing fish told us that we should find an adventure waiting for us round this corner."

"An adventure!" echoed the lady. "Truly, if you seek to go with me, you will run many risks."

12. "So much the better," said I. "We are ready to follow you to the world's end." She was the loveliest lady I had ever seen, and Jack and I both felt that it would be a great honour to serve her.

13. The princess then turned to the smith, and motioning towards us, she said,

"What think you, master smith? Shall I take these youths with me for pages or not?"

14. The old smith looked at us keenly.

"Ay, princess," he said at length, "but not in those strange clothes;" and, with these words, he pointed to our knickerbocker suits. "Come inside, young sirs, and I will lend you some garments that my sons have outgrown."

15. So we went into his cottage, which was next the forge; and presently we found ourselves

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decked out in suits of lincoln green, with flat caps to match, and daggers stuck in our belts. Next, the smith brought two sturdy little ponies for us to ride. He fastened a packet of food on one pony, and on the other a rolled-up bearskin, with which to keep the princess warm at night; then he told us to mount. And so we rode into the forest, the princess leading the way.

16. As we cantered along, the princess told us the reason of her being in the forest by herself. We learnt that the king of the neighbouring country, a hard-hearted tyrant called Guntz, had vowed that he would make her his wife; and when she refused to marry him, he invaded her kingdom, and lay siege to her castle.

17. But the princess managed to escape, and was now fleeing to her uncle's stronghold. As it happened, her servant had met with an accident soon after starting, and the princess was forced to leave him; so she was glad to have our company.

18. In return, we told her about ourselves; and thus the time passed pleasantly, until, just as twilight was falling, we came to a charcoal-burner's hut.

Luckily it was empty, although a great stack of charcoal was smouldering before the door.

19. "We will spend the night here," said the princess. So, while Jack attended to her horse, and our two ponies, I got the supper ready. After we had finished, we sat for a time watching the

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man in the moon come over the tree-tops with a smile on his face. Suddenly the princess touched my arm.

20. "What is that?" she said softly.

We stared hard, for, flying from every direction towards the red-hot charcoal, came countless bats; and on the furry back of each bat, sitting between its leathery wings, was a little black imp with shining green eyes.

21. The imps jumped off their strange steeds, and sat in a ring round the charcoal-pile, while the bats hung themselves head downwards from the trees. Then one of the imps perched himself on a stone; and, taking out a set of reed pipes, he blew a strain of slow and mournful music.

22. Up rose one little imp, and gravely danced round the wood-pile in time to the music. By ones and twos the other imps joined in, as the pipes played louder and faster.

23. Shriller and higher rose the pipes, faster and faster whirled the dancers, until the clearing seemed all a-gleam with the green light that shot from their eyes. Suddenly there was a piercing shriek from the pipes, a wild yell from the imps, and then silence: the dance was over.

24. "I hope they do not discover us," whispered the princess, as we saw the imps mounting again on the bats' backs. But just then one of our horses neighed; and instantly the imps came rushing and swarming into the hut.

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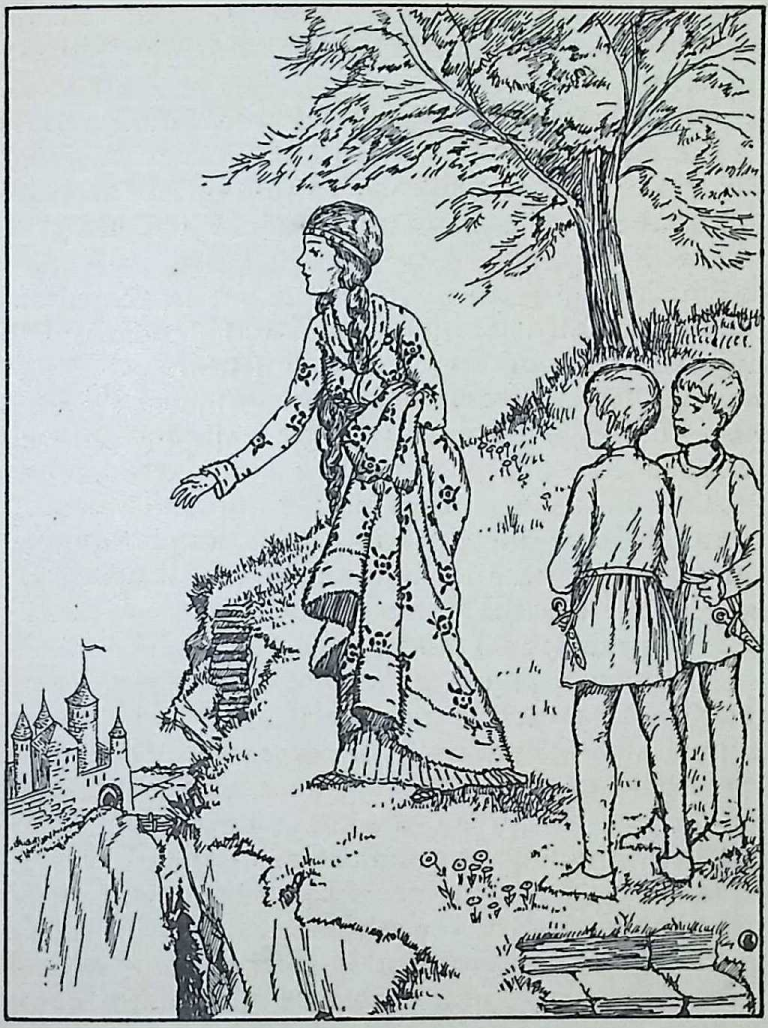

'"Yonder is my uncle's stronghold," she exclaimed.'—*Page* 64.

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25. We threw ourselves in front of the princess; but the chief imp pointed at her mockingly with his skinny finger.

"Oho," he laughed. "How comes the Princess Cynthia to be in the forest at this time of night?" And then he added, with a spiteful grin, "I go to tell my master, King Guntz, where she may be found!"

26. So saying, he wheeled his bat in the direction from which we had come, and flew off with his train of howling imps behind him.

"We are lost!" cried the princess. "To-morrow King Guntz will be in hot pursuit, and how can I escape from him?"

27. "Madam," said Jack, "if I may offer advice, it is that we first get a good night's rest. We can start early in the morning, and we must hope for the best."

The princess quite agreed with Jack; and, having made ourselves as snug as might be, we slept soundly through the night.

28. At daybreak we were wakened by the song of early birds; and, feeling ever so refreshed, we mounted, and rode on, all through the forenoon, without any cause for alarm. But as we stayed for a while at noon, to take some food, the sound of a hunting horn could be heard at no great distance.

29. "It is King Guntz," cried the princess, pale with fear. "What shall I do?"

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I had been thinking deeply on this very matter, as we journeyed along; so now I said,

"Pray, madam, deign to wrap yourself in the bear-skin, and pretend you are a dancing-bear. Jack can dispose of the horses, while I lead you along with a rope. Pardon me for proposing such a thing; but it is the only way of escape, so far as I can see."

30. The princess looked very doubtful, but at last she consented. She took a needle and thread from the bag that hung at her girdle, and helped us to sew her up in the skin. Then, as loosely as might be, I tied a rope round her neck; and behold a dancing-bear!

31. Jack took the saddles and bridles off our ponies, and sent them off into the forest. Then he buried the harness under a pile of leaves, mounted the princess's horse, and galloped away.

"I'll come back and meet you, when the hunt has passed me," he said.

32. He was hardly out of sight, when King Guntz and his followers were on us. Soldiers were searching the forest on either side of the path; and the king was riding along, with a frown on his face that made it dark as a thunder-cloud. He pulled up his horse when he saw us.

33. "Ha! a country youth and a dancing-bear," he exclaimed. "Have you seen a princess with two pages pass this way."

"No, my lord," I answered in a humble tone.

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"They must be in front of us," I heard the king muttering to himself, as he spurred forward.

34. When the last sound of the king's party had died away, I released the princess from the bear-skin; and then we walked on, until Jack came up on the princess's horse. As our ponies had been sent straying, we had to proceed on foot; but, the lady having mounted again, we ran one on each side of her, and so made what speed we could.

35. After a time the path led into a rocky glen. As we passed the entrance to a huge cave, there was a shout, and out came hundreds of dwarfs. Almost before we could cry out, we were overpowered and led into the cave, which opened out into a long tunnel.

36. Our captors hurried us along, until we came out of the tunnel into a great roomy cavern with a fire at one end. The flames were roaring up the mountain chimney, filling the underground world with red light and flickering black shadows.

37. We were taken before the head dwarf, who informed us that he would hold us prisoners until the arrival of King Guntz. When the princess heard this, she was greatly distressed, and begged the dwarf to set her free.

38. "I will give you all my gold and jewels," she said.

"I have more gold as it is, than I know what to do with," replied the dwarf. "But if you, or

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either of the youths, could rid my apple-orchard of the spell that lies upon it, I would gladly set you all free."

39. "Sir, let us see your orchard," said Jack. So the dwarf opened a door behind him; and then my brother and I stepped into the open air, leaving the princess, for the time being, in the cavern.

40. The rocks rose steeply round a large orchard, laid out in winding paths with flower-beds; and at either end was a fountain, one of molten silver, the other of gold. But trees, flowers, and grass had all been changed into gleaming glass, while the gold and silver fountains were frozen into the loveliest shapes one could dream of.

41. "If, in two hours' time, you can change this scene to what it was before the spell was cast upon it," said the dwarf, "you shall all go free."

42. He left us alone, and we started to walk round. Presently we found a well close up against the rock; and Jack said, "If only that singing fish lived here, we would ask him how to break the spell. No doubt he could tell us."

To our surprise, at that moment, the water began to bubble; and the singing fish stuck his head above the surface.

43. "There is a big apple-tree in the centre of the orchard," said the fish. "Get water from the well and pour it on the roots of that tree;

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then the spell will be broken. Cross at once to the far side of the orchard, pull away the curtain of ivy that is hanging against the rock, and you will see some steps. They will lead you to safety."

44. He splashed back into the water; and, as quickly as possible, we did just as he had said. No sooner did we pour the water round the tree than the whole orchard came to life again. The fountains threw up their gold and silver spray; the flowers bloomed in the grass; and a flash of light swept past our eyes, as here, there, and everywhere, pink and white apple-blossoms came out instantly upon the trees!

45. We discovered the steps cut in the rock behind the curtain of ivy, and soon we were on the top of the cliffs. There we found the princess waiting for us; and a cry of delight burst from her.

"Why," she exclaimed, pointing to a castle perched on a ledge of rock beneath us, "yonder is my uncle's stronghold."

46. But, as she spoke, a mighty wind swept Jack and me off our feet; and when we came to earth again, we were by the water-lily pond. We called to the fish, but in vain; and at last, greatly disappointed, we made our way home.

47. Jack and I often returned to the pond in the forest, but never again did we see or hear the singing fish.

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